The Importance of Cultural Connotations when Teaching Vocabulary

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Summary

In the current paper we are exploring the importance of cultural connotation in the vocabulary teaching, more precisely we are focused on the secondary meanings of the lexemes expressing colors. Those culturally motivated “secondary” meanings are the keys to understand received message properly, without any misinterpretation or even more, misunderstanding. The data is presented from English, Russian and Georgian languages. It is interesting that for each language some culturally determined meanings of words are authentic; also it should be mentioned, that in Georgian language some cultural meanings of the color expressing vocabulary has been borrowed from Russia (during Russian Empire and Soviet Union) and from Anglo-American culture during last decades (after increasing the role and influence of US in the Georgian politics, education, economic and social relationships).

We have come to the following conclusions: there are similarities in color vocabulary cultural connotations and significant differences as well: Blue – the color of sadness in English and color of romance (one from several culturally loaded meanings) in Georgian. Blue blood – means someone is from aristocratic family in all three languages.

Some similarities can be considered as universal cultural data (facts), but teacher should emphasize the similarities in order to make learning process for students more comfortable and familiar: Black – the color often associated with negative qualities.

Some similarities might be cultural borrowings (especially between Russian and Georgian languages, from Soviet time period, when both countries were the part of the same political (and partly socio-cultural) space): white – expressing social class, enemies of Soviet authorities in Georgian and Russian.

Differences between languages in this aspect can be considered as a cultural peculiarity. Teacher’s responsibility is to explain as precise as possible these differences to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation: black – expressing criminals in Georgian and Afro-Americans in English.

The language teacher’s responsibility is to explain as precise as possible these differences to avoid any vacant hole in the language teaching and keep the teaching standards high.

Keywords: language teaching, vocabulary teaching, primary and secondary meanings of colors, cultural connotation.

Santrauka

Straipsnyje kalbama apie kultūrinių konotacijų svarbą mokantis užsienie kalbos leksikos. Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama žodžių, reiškiančių spalvas, antrinėms reiškėms. Anglų, rusų, gruzių kalbų pavyzdžiais parodoma, kaip skirtingos kultūros lemia aptariamų žodžių antrines reiškėms, teigiama, kad tie skirtumai svarbūs norint adekvačiai suprasti teikiamą informaciją skirtingomis kalbomis. Straipsnyje nurodomi atvejai, kai visose trijose kalbose aptariamų spalvų reiškiančių žodžių antrinės reiškėms yra autentiškos, susijusios su savita kultūra, taip pat iškeliami antrinių reiškėmių skolinimosi atvejai (į gruzių kalbą iš rusų kalbos patekusios antrinės reiškėms, susijusios su kultūriniais SSRS ir Rusijos carinės imperijos reiškiniais; dėl JAV politinių įtakos sustipriėjo Gruzijoje į gruzių kalbą plintančios
Introduction

It is a general truth that to learn a language is to learn a culture. In this process, it is very important to offer a student the cultural heritage of the target culture as far as a learner's cultural norms and ideas, clichés and stereotypes encounter a new cultural space, sometimes causing the coincidence of these customs and cultural values, while, sometimes, these values are totally different. Besides, unfamiliarity with the cultural context may bring a student to a total non-understanding of a text, that is to a level of frustration.

Lexis and Culture

Teaching

In terms of sharing of sharing of cultural experience, the acquisition of lexis is very significant. Besides the fact that it is a construction material of a language (together with grammar and pronunciation), it is by means of lexis that it becomes possible to equip a learner with socio-cultural competencies of a target culture. In his work *Linguistics and Language Teaching*, David Wilkins wrote: „Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed“ (1972, 28). In order to perform its primary function, namely, to establish communication, it is necessary to have appropriate lexical stock and a skill to use it correctly. However, it is clear that to learn a lexical unit does not mean only to know how to translate it from one language into another, as far as vocabulary consists of much deeper layers than it seems.

When teaching vocabulary, there occur some obstacles, caused by cultural factors. In that case, learners find it difficult to connect new vocabulary with their cultural thinking, experience, especially when there is considerable difference between a native language (culture) and a target culture (Myung-Soon Hong, Hyang-Ki Min). It is not controversial that words carry different meanings in different cultures and are perceived differently because of their emotional and associative links and socio-cultural functions. Meanwhile, it is due to cultural difference that words acquire different symbolic meanings and cultural connotations in different cultural areas. Without the above mentioned factors, learning vocabulary and a language at large will not be complete. Unfortunately, this issue has frequently been spared by theoreticians and practitioners in language teaching.

For instance, take the very common word დედა “deda” (mother), belonging to the basic vocabularies in all languages. In English (more exactly in Anglo-American culture), Russian and Georgian this word denotes a female parent but with different social roles and influence both within one's family and towards one’s child. As is known, in Georgian culture, an emotional connection with a mother lasts for a long time. She takes part in important decisions of her child (here we do not touch upon about positive and negative sides). This word also denotes the eldest representative, the head of a family with a number of generations, the members of which are not her biological children. დედა “deda” is a main skolinės reikšmės iš anglų-amerikiečių kultūrinės aplinkos). Straipsnyje daromos tokios išvados:

- Skirtingų kultūrų įtaka kalbų žodžių, reiškiančių spalvą, reiškiančią antrinę reikšmę, sąlygoja įvairių politinių, dvasinio pobūdžio aspektų ir kultūrinio konteksto. Pavyzdžiui, žydra spalva, rudi skelbiama liūdesį, o gruzinų ir rusų kalboje, žydra spalva – romantiką, o „mėlyno kraujo žmogus“ suprantamas vienodai visose trijose kalbose – tai aristokratiškos prigimties asmuo.
- Kai kurie sutapimai interpretuotini kaip kultūrinės universaliosios. Pavyzdžiui, jo valdymo kalboje rodo negatyvius dalykus. Pedagogas, mokymasis užsienio kalboje, tai turėtų akcentuoti – tai tai pašakoję studento mokymosi procesą.
- Kai kurie esantys sutapimai interpretuotini kaip reiškiančių skoliniai. Pavyzdžiui, rusų ir gruzinų kalbose valanda spalva gali reikšti žmonių socialinę grupę, t.y. sovietinės valdžios priešus. Taigi mokantis užsienio kalbos yra svarbus suprasti žodžių antrines leksines reiškmes ir praplėsti jomis savo turimą žodyną. Visa tai didina besimokančiojo sociokultūrines kompetencijas.
- Esminiai žodžiai: kalbos mokymas; leksiniai vienetai; žodžių, reiškiančių spalvą, pagrindinės ir antrinės reiškmes; kultūrinė konotacija.
part of the words დედაქალაქი “dedakalaki” (the capital), დედასამშობლო “dedasamshoblo” (homeland), დედაენა “dedaena” (the mother tongue), დედაბოჟი “dedaboji” (the main pillar) – we think that it shows a close emotional connection with a woman as far as the above-mentioned words carry a special emotional meaning (positive and sensible) in the Georgian culture.

Differences in meanings caused by socio-cultural factors in English, Russian and Georgian, may cause misunderstanding of a message or incorrect interpretation.

We should also consider the fact that the lexical stock of a language is very changeable and sensitive part, that is easily influenced by socio-political and cultural changes. However, there exist some comparatively stable cultural aspects that are less prone to changes, and, lexis more or less stable. Such aspects primarily are religion, moral values, customs, rituals, etc.

Hence, in language teaching, it is very important to pay special attention to the discussion of cultural clichés, connotations that are different in cultures and also for people, having American socio-cultural heritage and with Russian and Georgian cultural backgrounds.

Culture tells us to give each symbol (or a word with such a symbolic meaning) its additional meaning. Thus, when teaching vocabulary, a learner should also be provided with a secondary, peripheral meaning of a word.

**Primary and Secondary Meanings of Colors**

As is known, colors have their cultural-emotional shades, having been formed as thought stereotypes for individual cultures. Of course, a learner should know all direct and indirect meanings of colors.

It is very interesting to compare the words for red in American English, Russian and Georgian. In American culture, this color is associated with entertainment, pleasure. “Red letter days” or the days marked with red are associated with death, grief. It

In Anglo-American culture, “red” is also associated with one’s emotional condition; e.g. “red flag” means something that makes a man angry.

Seeing red_ Probably from the old belief that bulls got angry when they saw red. Thus seeing red equated to becoming angry.

In American culture, “red-faced” means “shamed.” It has the same meaning in Georgian and Russian.

As different from Georgian and Russian, in English “in the red” is a business term and means that somebody/something is in debt. In English the phrase “red lights” means being in a dangerous situation. In colloquial Georgian, it refers the following: “You failed in something”, “You had to stop something you wanted.” However, in both cases, we have the same results. It conveys a negative message.

Red carries a different meaning for peoples from the former socialist countries, Russians and Georgians among them. This color was a symbol of the revolution, communism. Because of the socio-political changes, it lost such connotations, and now it can be discussed as a lingua-cultural artifact. In order to learn a language perfectly, one should not neglect this fact.

Black color in the American culture has a negative meaning. It is associated with death, grief. It has a negative connotation in the following words: Blacklist, black market, black-hearted. This color has the same meaning in Georgian and the Russian cultures though it also has distinct ones. E.g. in the Anglo-American world, it is a politically incorrect expression towards the members of the Negroid race. In Georgian culture, it refers to a man with criminal mentality and in Russian _ people from Caucasus or Central Asia. Of course, the lack of knowledge of connotations may cause confusion.

**Kultūrinių konotacijų reikšmė kalbos leksinių vienetu mokymosi procese**

As for the green color, it has a neutral meaning in English. In these cultures, this color refer to non-traditional sexual orientation that has a negative meaning for Georgian traditional culture. This meaning eclipsed the old one, namely, the color of romanticism, having widely been spread in the Georgian cultural area.

In the Georgian culture, it refers the following: “You wanted.” However, in both cases, we have the same results. It conveys a negative message.

For the green color, it has a neutral meaning in Georgian. In Russian expression моска зелёная denotes sorrow, sadness. In the Anglo-American cultural space, it is associated with jealousy, envy; green-eyed, green monster. In English, it has an
interesting function; this color indicates an inexperienced man, e.g. a green hand, a green horn and also a newcomer in society, culture, one who is unaware of native customs. It refers to emigrants and has a bit degrading meaning.

In the Georgian language, there is a lexeme მარადმწვანე “maradmwvane” (evergreen) and, in Russian, there is вечно зеленый, referring to a man who does not manage to finish his studies or get the permission to go to university. It has a bit ironic tinge.

In the Georgian and the Russian colloquial language, მწვანე “mwvane”, зеленый“ denotes a dollar note. Language teachers should pay attention to this issue.

In American and Russian, as well as in the Georgian cultural space, the color “yellow” has the meaning of tasteless, scandalous… This is an adopted cultural meaning that has become a universal one because of its spread: ყვითელი „Kviteli presa“, yellow Journalism; желтая пресса. It’s interesting that, in the Georgian-speaking community, the phrase “yellow pages” has not so far been established with its widely-spread meaning.

It should be considered as a peculiarity of Georgian that this color has the meaning of sickness, feeling bad გადევს “Kviteli peri gadevs” (You have a yellow color), სანთელივი “santelivit Kvitelia” (He is as yellow as a candle).

Grey is a color of sadness, monotony, being without interest in Georgian and Russian but not in American.

In American, Russian and Georgian cultures, white is a color of innocence, holiness. It even can turn the negative meaning into the positive one e.g. თეთრი შური tetri šuri, white envy, белая зависть.

In the former socialist countries, this color denoted the enemies, opponents of the communists, however, presently, owing to the known political processes, it is considered as an archaism.

We believe that this lexeme has some class (social) meaning in English. The term “white-collar worker” means a person who has to do some administrative work, while the phrase “blue-collar worker” refers to a person who works physically (white collar, blue caller http://dictionary.ge)

As for the pink color (with its semantic variants), it has a meaning of naivety in Georgian and Russian e.g. ვარდისფერი სათვალით ყურება “vardisperi satvalit Kureba” (to wear pink glasses).

In Georgian, it expresses beautiful color of the skin of a face: ატმის ყვავილის ფერი სახე აქვს “aṭmis Kvavilis peri saxe akvs” (Her face has a color of a peach flower). As differently from Anglo-American culture, it refers to a representative of female sexual minority in Russian and the Georgian cultures.

Conclusions

Culture tells us to attach associative meanings to each symbol or a word with a symbolic meaning. This is what attaches an exact meaning to words and prescribes their semantic field. Besides, this is what gives an opportunity to a person to perceive a language thoroughly. Thus, learners and teachers should direct their endeavors towards the issues in question.

We believe that, together with the learning (academic) environment the best way to enrich the cultural connotative vocabulary is to learn components of a target culture such as films, books, TV programs, press, virtual or face-to-face communication with a native speaker, as far as there can often be found meanings developed from a specific context. A learner remembers and perceives words better when he realizes the change of the meaning with the change of the context and the above-mentioned things give the best opportunity to him. Therefore, teaching and learning color vocabulary should be considered as an indivisible part of the cultural component.

Literature

Myung-Soon Hong, Hyang-Ki Min, Culture-Specific Vocabulary Teaching For Active Communication. – e-flt.nus.edu.sg.